

# U.S. troops suspected of human-rights violations

Afghan government officials say the United States' use of force could turn Afghans against the U.S.-led coalition

By Liz Sly  
Chicago Tribune (KRT)

KABUL, Afghanistan — U.S. forces in Afghanistan are committing a range of human-rights abuses, including torture and the use of excessive force, in their hunt for terrorism suspects, according to a report released Sunday by Human Rights Watch.

The report cites numerous instances in which U.S. soldiers allegedly used violent methods to arbitrarily detain civilians who have not taken part in combat activities, calling into question the quality of U.S. intelligence.

In other instances, the report said, U.S. forces opened fire on homes before detaining suspects, sometimes causing casualties among innocent civilians.

"U.S. forces regularly use military means and methods during arrest operations in residential areas where law enforcement techniques would be

more appropriate," the report said. "This has resulted in unnecessary civilian casualties and may in some cases have involved indiscriminate or disproportionate force in violation of international humanitarian law."

A U.S. military spokesman rejected the findings, saying the report failed to take into account the nature of the war in Afghanistan.

"I think they have the wrong take on the war," Lt. Col. Bryan Hilferty said. "They're talking about arrests, but we're not arresting people. This is a combat zone, and we're a combat force."

"The report does not mention the Taliban killing 15 people in Kandahar in January, including eight children, and they don't mention the Taliban burning down girls' schools," he said. "They don't mention the work (coalition forces) have done on reconstruction."

Human Rights Watch, which is based in New York, said that in one incident in July 2002, a man sleeping outside was killed by a stray bullet when U.S. forces stormed a house before arresting its occupants.

Another man interviewed by the group said U.S. forces stormed into his home in the southern province of

Uruzgan, tied him up and then pushed his two children, ages 11 and 13, to the ground.

"In front of my eyes, two Americans laid down both the boys on the ground and pressed their boots into the children's backs. And they were yelling: 'Where is the ammunition? Where is the ammunition?'" the man told Human Rights Watch. "The children were shrieking and shouting."

The man, who said he had fought against the Taliban and had no idea why U.S. forces raided his home in February 2003, was detained and then released after a couple of days.

Others have been held at U.S. detention centers for up to two years in inhumane conditions without access to family members or lawyers, and in many instances they have been mistreated, the group said. Altogether, the United States has arrested more than 1,000 people in the past two years, most of whom have been released.

Freed detainees told the group that U.S. forces beat them severely, doused them with cold water and subjected them to freezing temperatures. Many said they were forced to stay awake or to stand or kneel in painful positions for extended periods, according to the report.

"There is compelling evidence suggesting that U.S. personnel have committed acts against detainees amounting to torture, or cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment," said Brad Adams, executive director of Human Rights Watch's Asia division.

The group cites the deaths in custody of three detainees, two at the Bagram air base north of Kabul in December 2002 and one at the Asadabad air base in eastern Afghanistan in June 2003. The first two deaths were ruled homicides by U.S. military pathologists, but U.S. officials have yet to explain what happened to the three men.

The deaths in custody are being investigated, and U.S. forces have "made changes to our procedures as a result," Hilferty said.

The group also cites the deaths of eight civilians, including six children, in December when U.S. forces raided a house in search of a Taliban suspect. The suspect was not there, but during the raid a wall collapsed on a neighboring house, killing the family.

"The use of military methods and tactics during the operation may have violated international legal obligations to minimize harm to civilians," Human Rights Watch said.

The group said it took into account that Afghanistan is a war zone but said that did not justify the abuses it had uncovered by U.S. forces.

"The Taliban and other insurgent groups are illegally targeting civilians and humanitarian aid workers," Adams said. "But abuses by one party to a conflict do not justify violations by the other side. This is a fundamental principle of the laws of war."

The report comes as U.S. forces step up their efforts to tame the troubled eastern and southern border regions where most of the raids described in the report occurred and where a rejuvenated Taliban guerrilla movement has been active recently.

Afghan government officials frequently have complained that some of the tactics used by U.S. forces risk turning Afghans against their government and the U.S.-led coalition.

As part of the new strategy, U.S. forces will spend more time in communities and will deliver more aid, U.S. officials say, in an effort to win the hearts and minds of locals who otherwise may fall under the influence of the renewed Taliban.

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# Journalists from United States face violence in Haiti

Spanish television reporter Ricardo Ortega died after being shot in the chest

By Susannah A. Nesmith and Richard Brand  
Knight Ridder Newspapers (KRT)

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti — The gunfire came from all directions, from down the street and from rooftops, and it lasted at least 10 minutes. When it was over, one journalist was dead and another was wounded.

Killed was Ricardo Ortega, a Spanish television correspondent, shot in the chest.

Wounded was Michael Laughlin, 37, a photographer with The South Florida Sun-Sentinel newspaper.

Sunday night, Laughlin was

awaiting evacuation from Haiti by U.S. Marines aboard a medical airplane, his newspaper said. Laughlin's wife in Hollywood, Fla., was poised to join him. She was told he could be flown to Puerto Rico or Miami.

The ambush marked the first time a foreign journalist was killed since the Haitian uprising began last month, though violence against journalists is common in Haiti.

Human rights groups such as the Committee to Protect Journalists have warned that reporters are being targeted in the Caribbean nation, where several prominent Haitian newsmen have been killed in recent years.

Those attacked on Sunday were among a group of about six journalists who were sticking together while covering a large afternoon march against the remnants of exiled Haitian President

Jean-Bertrand Aristide's government.

Blocks from the ornate National Palace, the event quickly turned violent, though it's unclear who was shooting. But the journalists said they felt they were the targets.

"Mike was the first to get hit," said Peter Andrew Bosch, a photographer for The Miami Herald who was in the group. He said Laughlin was struck in the shoulder, face and neck, the impact knocking him to the ground. Fellow journalists dragged him into the private home of a good Samaritan.

"I kept him talking, got him laughing. He was in a lot of pain," said Bosch, who administered first aid to Laughlin.

Meanwhile, Bosch said, Ortega waited in the house's courtyard. Suddenly, gunfire came down from above, "either from a rooftop or a

balcony," Bosch said.

Ortega was hit in the chest and fell bleeding.

The reporters were not wearing bulletproof vests.

Members of the group called the U.S. Embassy to report the attacks and ask for help. When none came, freelance photographer Daniel Morel ran outside to summon an ambulance.

"Daniel's the real hero," Bosch said.

The ambulance arrived after the gunfire subsided and took Laughlin and Ortega to Canape Vert Hospital, where Ortega died of his wounds.

"Michael was doing his job, and we're doing everything we can, including praying for his speedy and safe return," said Kevin Courtney, spokesman for The Sun-Sentinel.

Laughlin, who has shot photos for The Sun-Sentinel since 1998, arrived

in Haiti on Friday with the newspaper's international and Hispanic affairs reporter, Sandra Hernandez.

He called his wife Saturday to report that everything was quiet.


"He told me, 'There's nothing going on, but there's a demonstration tomorrow,'" said Kathy Laughlin, who is a copy editor at The Sun-Sentinel. "That's where it happened."

Laughlin has taken some notable photographs during his career, including one on April 22, 2000, of Elian Gonzalez being carried out of his relatives' Little Havana home during the federal raid to remove the boy and reunite him with his father.

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